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Phoenix murders

It is a pity that Joseph Treaster succumbed to the temptations of yellow journalism in writing about so-called Phoenix Murders in the December *Penthouse*. Since I was apparently his only source who was willing to talk on the record (doesn't this tell us something?), let me again clarify the real facts:

(1) Phoenix was *not* "an American" program. It was a South Vietnamese effort, which we tried hard to influence but could in no sense control. Americans did not "run" the DIOCCs and PIOCCs.

(2) Phoenix was *not* "a CIA" program. Even advice and support was primarily a military function, with the CIA playing only a minor role.

(3) Phoenix was not even a discrete "program" but an attempt to pull together and coordinate better the ongoing efforts of numerous SVN military and police agencies that had been trying ineffectively for years to roll up the enemy's insurgency apparatus. For example, Treaster speaks knowingly—or so he thinks—about "cordon and search operations," "PRUs," "PICs," "ambushes," "tiger cages," and the like. All of these existed before Phoenix, during

Phoenix, and after Phoenix.

(4) To call Phoenix a "murder" program except in the sense that war itself is murder, is grotesque. It was a legitimate war-time effort, in fact more discriminating than most. Neither Treaster nor anyone else has advanced any hard evidence whatsoever that "tens of thousands of ordinary South Vietnamese civilians were murdered..."

(5) Nor is there any correlation between numbers in Vietnamese jails, most of whom were common criminals, and the Phoenix program. These are just a few of Treaster's many errors.

True, Phoenix was a fiasco as I called it once. Like most things we pressed our Vietnamese allies to do in defense of their country, it was not carried out the way we urged. This is one reason why they (and we) failed so miserably in the end. But let's not exaggerate Phoenix out of all proportion—and lay all its alleged sins at the door of the CIA—just because the practice is currently so fashionable.—R.W. Komer, address withheld

Joseph Treaster replies: Mr. Komer, who was the chief of the U.S. "pacification program" in Vietnam in 1967 and 1968, keeps making the same tired arguments. He reminds me of Gen. William Westmoreland, who is still trying to convince us that the 1968 Tet Offensive was a triumphant victory of the United States and its now-defeated South Vietnamese allies.

Komer says that Phoenix was not an American program or a CIA program. Well, who invented it? Komer himself described in my article how he (then a White House special assistant) and William Colby (then the head of CIA's Far East Division) initially developed Phoenix. Both later went to Vietnam to oversee the program. Did someone other than the United States finance Phoenix? Does Komer wish to argue that Vietnam was not an American war? I'm afraid that it was Komer's style of twisted logic that served us so well in Vietnam, and I think we've all had quite enough of it.